

Opening Statement for Representative Alma Adams
Subcommittee Hearing on Higher Education & Workforce Training:
“Strengthening America’s Higher Education System”
Tuesday, March 17th, 2015

Thank you, Chairwoman Foxx, for holding this hearing on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). In Ranking Member Rubén Hinojosa’s absence, I will be serving as your Democratic Co-Chair of today’s subcommittee hearing.

I wish to acknowledge the Ranking Member of our full committee, Congressman Bobby Scott, and thank him for being here for this important hearing, which marks the beginning of our efforts related to the reauthorization of Higher Education Act.

To our distinguished panel of experts, welcome and thank you for joining us this morning.

Today’s committee discussion will focus on ways Congress and the federal government can strengthen America’s higher education system. For committee Democrats, increasing affordability, accessibility and student success in higher education are key priorities for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act this Congress.

Attaining a college degree is more important than ever. According to a recent report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require some form of postsecondary education.

In light of this fact, I am deeply concerned that children living poverty will be left behind without a college degree. As this committee considers the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, we must ensure that *all* students, including low-income students that are often students of color, have access to a high quality postsecondary education and are equipped with the knowledge and 21st century skills they need to succeed.

First, the reauthorization must address college affordability and strengthen federal student aid programs. In my view, increasing the purchasing power of the Pell grant and restoring the year-round Pell program can make college more affordable for millions of students.

Today, approximately 8.4 million students benefit from the nation’s federal Pell grant program. The maximum Pell grant award of \$5,730 in 2014, however, covers less than one third of the cost of a public four-year institution. A restoration of the year-round Pell grant program could help to accelerate degree completion for Pell recipients and reduce college costs. I am pleased that my colleagues on the other side of aisle recognize the value of incentivizing flexibility, continuous enrollment, and college completion for Pell grant recipients.

With regard to Federal Direct Loans, it is vitally important that students and families maintain access to student loans with low-interest rates and affordable repayment options. To reduce student loan defaults and protect student borrowers, we must do a better job of improving loan servicing and help struggling borrowers to rehabilitate their loans.

We must also ensure that parents have access to Parent PLUS loans. As you are aware, changes made to Parent PLUS Loan Program in 2011 made it more difficult for nearly 28,000 HBCU students and their families to afford the cost of a college degree.

But let's be clear, the federal government cannot do this alone.

States and institutions must do their part to rein in college costs and make college more affordable. To be sure, the federal government can strengthen the federal-state partnership in higher education by incentivizing states to bolster state investments in higher education and state financial aid programs. This type of partnership could help to make college more affordable and accessible for students.

While our nation has one of the most comprehensive and reputable higher education systems in the world, disparities among institutions persist. For instance, HBCUs and Minority Serving Institutions continue to be under-resourced. HBCUs represent only three percent of the nation's institutions of higher learning, but graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees. In addition, the institutions graduate more than 50 percent of African American professionals and public school teachers.

Having earned both an undergraduate and master's degree from an HBCU, as well as having taught at one for 40 years, I clearly understand the long-standing contributions that these institutions have made to American higher education and to society.

Because of my experiences, I am especially pleased to co-chair the bipartisan Congressional HBCU Caucus with my colleague Bradley Byrne. Given their vital importance to underrepresented and low-income students, the federal government must continue to support and invest in these institutions.

In particular, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act must ensure that HBCUs and Minority Serving institutions have the capacity and resources they need to thrive and provide students with access to a high quality education now and into the future.

Finally, our nation's higher education system must improve college completion rates for all students.

We must move away from linear measurements of success that do not take into account the unique circumstances that face low-income students, that are often students of color. Without a college degree, it becomes more difficult for students to access good jobs and careers and improve their lives.

Moving forward, I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to reauthorize the Higher Education Act in this Congress.

Chairman Foxx, with that, I yield back.